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I'll tell secrets if tried for theft, retired general threatens

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In 1978, Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard B. Collins retired from managing America's spy money in Europe with a 13-gun salute and a commendation from his boss, Gen. Alexander Haig.



Collins

Last month, Collins was accused of taking \$450,000 from those secret Swiss bank accounts.

Now he sits on a waterfront club patio in Fort Lauderdale, sipping Shirley Temples and marveling at it all.

"I'm not some shoe clerk that tried to steal any money," he fumes. Not at all. He managed millions for CIA sleuthing and proved he could keep his mouth shut about sensitive national security matters.

But when a federal grand jury in Fort Lauderdale indicted him on six counts of embezzlement, Collins threatened to tell all.

That threat is part of his strategy to avoid a possible 60-year federal prison term.

The CIA and Justice Department do not take that threat lightly. Prosecutors would rather conduct Collins' trial in secret than let him dodge prosecution under the cloak of national security — a tactic known in the intelligence world as "graymail," a more subtle form of blackmail.

The threat to divulge secrets does not come easily from Collins, 53, a fast burner who bagged a chest full of combat medals and the two stars of a major general while other officers marked time.

"I'm a strong supporter of the U.S. government, the Department of Defense and a lot of other agencies that are concerned with doing the right thing," he said.

"I feel very strongly that everything will come out" to prove his innocence, he said.

Friends and colleagues were stunned by the indictment. An Air Force colonel and six generals who knew him for much of his career told The Herald that Collins was a talented, ambitious officer with a knack for military politics and combat leadership.

He was a top aide to former Secretary of State Haig, who then was supreme commander of NATO and U.S. forces in Europe. With a hefty salary and all the perquisites of a general officer, he wasn't suffering financially.

Collins' mother, who was called to the Grand Jury to testify about a cash-stuffed briefcase left in her house, scoffed at the charges.

"He was one of those gung ho boys for the U.S. of A.," said Marion Collins, 74. "He isn't physically capable of doing the type of thing he's been charged with. If there's a God in heaven, I know damn well he will be vindicated."

Investigators contend that in November 1977 Collins went to Geneva, removed \$445,000 from Swiss Bank Corp. account 54-309 FA and put it into account 54-197 HH under his own name.

On separate occasions in the next five months he allegedly took \$5,000, \$4,000, and \$10,000 out of the second account.

From 1975 until 1978, Collins embezzled an unspecified amount of Air Force cash in the Swiss Bank Corp. and Lloyd's Bank International Limited, also of Geneva, the indictment said.

Collins' defense attorney Stephen Bronis has insisted all along that the money wasn't embezzled. "He was

indicted for doing the exact things his job told him to do," Bronis said.

In a preview of his legal strategy, the general insisted he properly used the accounts for CIA and military intelligence activities abroad. He also properly laundered cash, court documents said.

If necessary, his attorney said, Collins will tell all about his activities as director of plans and policy for the military in Europe, the top-secret department that "interfaced" with the CIA.

"I've got nothing to hide," Collins said.

But if government lawyers have their way, Collins' revelations will remain as secret as the papers he kept locked in his Pentagon vault.

A week after federal prosecutors won the six-count indictment against Collins last month, they moved to prevent public access to the court file and portions of the trial under the Classified Information Procedures Act.

In 1980, Congress passed the law to allow federal judges to protect government secrets in court to prevent intelligence officials from using graymail to avoid prosecution.

The law has been invoked only rarely, and has yet to be scrutinized by an appellate court.

So far, U.S. District Judge James C. Paine in West Palm Beach has agreed with the government that the case demands secrecy.